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SUBJECT: English Language Programs to Support Reconciliation in Sri Lanka

**¶11.** Summary: Limited access to quality English instruction has left successive generations of Sri Lankan youth without the language skills to interact across ethnic or international boundaries, curbing their chances for professional employment and social reconciliation. After 25 years of civil conflict, improved access to English language instruction is key not only to Sri Lanka's economic development, but to establishing diverse lines of communication and information access for youth who have long been radicalized along ethnic lines. Embassy Colombo has multiple programs to improve English training access to marginalized youth and to undertrained teachers across the country, but efforts have been limited by staffing and funding shortfalls. Embassy Colombo proposes to strengthen current program reach and longevity through increased staffing and access to technology, as well as through the establishment of innovative long-term partnerships with Government and professional organizations to develop initiatives based on proven U.S. teaching models. End Summary

#### The State of English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka

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**¶12.** The level of English language proficiency among young people in Sri Lanka is low, affected by social class, limited access to English education, and a lingering stigma against foreign influence. Up until the 1960s, English was widely taught in Sri Lankan schools and knowledge of English was high, particularly among those with university or post-secondary education. On the heels of a post-colonial nationalist movement in Sri Lanka, schools moved to a Sinhala-only curriculum and dropped requirements to learn English as a foreign language. By the 1970s most qualified English teachers had retired without replacement. The policy led to a number of direct and indirect, short and long term consequences, including: a severely limited pool of qualified English teachers with private and urban schools claiming the bulk of English teachers; rural youth, because of the limited access, lag behind urban youth in terms of English proficiency; university students, the majority of whom come from rural areas, lack English skills when they enter university; the majority of arts and humanities university students lack adequate English skills when they graduate, leading to ongoing problems in finding work; and youth proficient in English choose jobs in the more lucrative tourism and business processing outsourcing (call-centers) sectors over jobs in English teaching.

#### Improved English Language Teaching: A Means to Support Reconciliation in Post-War Sri Lanka.

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**¶13.** For the past quarter century, Sri Lanka has been marred by a war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In recent years, the Government has launched a campaign to defeat the LTTE and reclaim the remaining territory held by the LTTE, an entity designated by the United States as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The Government stands on the verge of a military victory in the conflict. However, a deep-seeded mistrust between Sri Lanka's ethnic communities remains. The United States has long urged the Government of Sri Lanka to seek a political solution to the conflict and seek ways to bridge ethnic and social divides in the country.

**¶14.** English can serve as a vehicle to support reconciliation and greater economic prosperity throughout the country. First, the vast majority of Tamils and Singhalese do not speak each other's languages. This hinders interregional commerce and cross-cultural understanding. When English was widely spoken in the country, it served as a link-language. Second, the deficiency in English

language creates a lag on economic growth. Sri Lanka has not seen the boom in call centers and other services industries that India has enjoyed. This is due partially to the war, but also because the pool of proficient English speakers is limited. An end to the war coupled with a greater concentration on the development of English language skills the country would translate to greater foreign investment and an enhanced livelihood potential. Finally, extremism among both Sinhalese and Tamil populations could perpetuate mistrust and the root causes of the conflict. Improved English skills, together with greater access to internet, could help Sri Lankan youth to have more global perspectives and not be as susceptible to the influences of extremists.

#### What is the Embassy Doing?

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**¶15.** One important Mission Strategic Plan goal is to focus Embassy Public Diplomacy resources on programs that foster reconciliation among youth. Consequently, English language programs are increasingly at the forefront of that effort.

**¶16.** Our flagship English Language initiative is the Access Program. Now in its third year, 312 students of all ethnicities from ten cities around the country are now involved in the program. The Embassy is taking increased interest in the program. In April, Post will sponsor a short-film workshop for students around Sri Lanka. Participants will work in mixed groups to make films on themes important to young people. The bulk of the participants will be Access students or alumni. Later this year, post will inaugurate the South Asia Youth Leadership Program. Seven high school aged students will join counterparts from Maldives and Nepal for a three-week leadership workshop in the U.S. We intend to include some of our Access programs in that project.

**¶17.** Post is also working with our English Language Fellow to organize a multiweek, multistep training program in spring 2009 for English teachers from Jaffna, Batticaloa, and Anuradhapura. The program aims to train a cadre of teachers who will then act as trainers in their respective cities. We would follow up the training with continued support by future English Language Fellows and English Language Specialists and by providing some U.S. Government-designed English Language Teaching materials.

**¶18.** Post is also working with Sri Lanka's Fulbright Commission to institute an English Teaching Assistant program. Under the plan, two recent U.S. university graduates would support English Language Teaching classes of secondary and university students. The Fulbright Commission is also discussing the designation of grants for students seeking advanced ELT degrees in the U.S.

**¶19.** Embassy Colombo is also increasing English Language programming at our American Center library in Colombo, and our American Corners in Kandy and Oluvil. Among the initiatives planned is an English Club. Each week, young people would get together with English speakers to have discussions on set topics or books that the group is reading.

#### What does the Embassy Want to Do?

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**¶10. Expanding Access:** The Access program has a proven record of success. It enables us to provide English Language training to a large numbers of youth at a relatively low cost. Post would like to double the number of cities to twenty, and the number of participants to 600, with a particular focus on programs in Eastern and possibly Northern Sri Lanka. Parts of the the East were controlled by the LTTE until 2007. The GSL is in final stages of regaining last of the territory in the North that is controlled by the LTTE. Embassy Colombo currently has funding for a short-term Alumni Coordinator to ensure continued quality interaction with returnees from Embassy exchange programs. The Embassy would like to expand this position to full time, long-term to include ongoing active engagement with youth Alumni of the Access program.

**¶11. Teach for Sri Lanka:** The Peace Secretariat, a Government of Sri Lanka institution that is tasked with aiding the peace process, is working together with Interact, a highly active and popular youth-wing of the Rotary Club in Sri Lanka, to create a program that would bring youth from different regions in Sri Lanka to live and work in other regions. Students with strong English skills could

help with language teaching in rural areas, while concurrently helping to breed greater understanding and reconciliation. The Embassy would like to assist the Peace Secretariat in these efforts by connecting them with Teach for All, the international wing of Teach for America, to design their program, and by providing some seed funding to launch the initiative.

**¶12. Computer Centers for Access Alumni:** In each city where there is an Access program, Post would like to work with our contractor to have a small center with 3-4 computers that would enable alumni to use State Department online ELT resources and have access to other US Embassy informational material.

**¶13. English Language Fellows:** The Embassy would like to have an additional English Language Fellow. This would greatly enhance our ability to provide teacher training programs around the country.

**¶14. English Language Teaching at American Corners:** Post would like to offer low-cost English and IT classes at our American Center library in Colombo and our two American Corners in Kandy and Oluvil. The coordinators at each corner have identified English Language classes as an important priority about which we are queried daily. The classes would help raise the visibility of our Corners.

**¶15. Utilizing New Technologies to Deliver ELT Modules:** Internet penetration in Sri Lanka is low, particularly in rural areas. However, mobile phone use, including text messaging, is ubiquitous. Post would like to explore ways to distribute limited English language module via text messaging or through mobile phone-based video games.

**¶16. Enhanced Cooperation with SLELTA:** The Sri Lanka English Language Teachers Association (SLELTA) is the only national professional body of English teachers in Sri Lanka. Its members are from all social levels and geographical regions of the country, teaching English at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Embassy Colombo has worked for years with SLELTA to improve training of English teachers; conducting exchanges, hosting speakers, advisors and embedding an English Language Fellow with the group. Embassy Colombo would like to establish a long-term program of cooperation to build SLELTA's capacity, including an ongoing advisor program, provision of training materials and delivery of a regular curriculum of in-service teacher training. Ongoing partnership with this well-organized and motivated organization in their efforts to improve primary and secondary level English teacher skills, and to reach out of urban areas to improve English access in rural communities, will provide a long running consistent base from which many of the above proposed programs can draw and multiply to harder to reach populations.

**¶17. Funding Request**

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Post would be unable to fund the proposed projects under existing allocations. Post will provide full cost breakdowns for the above projects upon request.

**¶18. Conclusion:** The Government of Sri Lanka has named 2009 the year of English and Information Technology Education. There is unprecedented recognition throughout the public and private sector of the importance of these skill sets, but severely limited resources to provide the needed training. The approaching end of Sri Lanka's decades-long conflict will require innovative strategies for development and reconciliation - most importantly English language development. Demand for English teaching resources from Embassy Colombo has never been higher and the opportunity for American outreach to younger, more diverse audiences in a positive learning atmosphere has never been better.

Blake